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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the contextual factors that affect students' learning of a second language. These individual, social, and societal factors can be considered from the perspective of the language, the learner, and the learning process. These perspectives are discussed as they relate to learning any second language, with a particular focus on how they affect adolescent learners of English as a second language. Issues related to language include language distance, native language proficiency, knowledge of the second language, dialect and register, language status, and language attitudes. Contextual factors related to the learner include the diverse needs of the learners, peer pressure, the absence of role models, and the level of home support. Factors related to the learning process include the following: learning styles, motivation, and classroom interaction. (VWL)

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Contextual Factors in Second Language Acquisition

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While many discussions about learning a second language focus on teaching methodologies, little emphasis is given to the contextual factors—individual, social, and societal—that affect students' learning. These contextual factors can be considered from the perspective of the language, the learner, and the learning process. This digest discusses these perspectives as they relate to learning any second language, with a particular focus on how they affect adolescent learners of English as a second language.

Language

Several factors related to students' first and second languages shape their second language learning. These factors include the linguistic distance between the two languages, students' level of proficiency in the native language and their knowledge of the second language, the dialect of the native language spoken by the students (i.e., whether it is standard or nonstandard), the relative status of the students' language in the community, and societal attitudes toward the students' native language.

Language distance

Specific languages can be more or less difficult to learn, depending on how different from or similar they are to the languages the learner already knows. At the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, for example, languages are placed in four categories depending on their average learning difficulty from the perspective of a native English speaker. The basic intensive language course, which brings a student to an intermediate level, can be as short as 24 weeks for languages such as Dutch or Spanish, which are Indo European languages and use the same writing system as English, or as long as 65 weeks for languages such as Arabic, Korean, or Vietnamese, which are members of other language families and use different writing systems.

Native language proficiency

The student's level of proficiency in the native language—including not only oral language and literacy, but also metalinguistic development, training in formal and academic features of language use, and knowledge of rhetorical patterns and variations in genre and style—affects acquisition of a second language. The more academically sophisticated the student's native language knowledge and abilities, the easier it will be for that student to learn a second language. This helps explain why foreign exchange students tend to be successful in American high school classes: They already have high school level proficiency in their native language.

Knowledge of the second language

Students' prior knowledge of the second language is of course a significant factor in their current learning. High school students learning English as a second language in a U.S. classroom may possess skills ranging from conversational fluency acquired from contacts with the English-speaking world to formal knowledge obtained in English as a foreign language classes in their countries of origin. The extent and type of prior knowledge is an essential consideration in planning instruction. For example, a student with informal conversational English skills may have little understanding of English grammatical systems and may need specific instruction in English grammar.

Dialect and register

Learners may need to learn a dialect and a formal register in school that are different from those they encounter in their daily lives. This involves acquiring speech patterns that may differ significantly from those they are familiar with and value as members of a particular social group or speech community.

Language status

Consideration of dialects and registers of a language and of the relationships between two languages includes the relative prestige of different languages and dialects and of the cultures and ethnic groups associated with them. Students whose first language has a low status vis a vis the second may lose their first language, perhaps feeling they have to give up their own linguistic and cultural background to join the more prestigious society associated with the target language.

Language attitudes

Language attitudes in the learner, the peer group, the school, the neighborhood, and society at large can have an enormous effect on the second language learning process, both positive and negative. It is vital that teachers and students examine and understand these attitudes. In particular, they need to understand that learning a second language does not mean giving up one's first language or dialect. Rather, it involves adding a new language or dialect to one's repertoire.

This is true even for students engaged in formal study of their first language. For example, students in Spanish for native speakers classes may feel bad when teachers tell them that the ways they speak Spanish are not right. Clearly, this is an issue of dialect difference. School (in this case, classroom Spanish) requires formal registers and standard dialects, while conversation with friends and relatives may call for informal registers and nonstandard dialects. If their ways of talking outside of school are valued when used in appropriate contexts, students are more likely to be open to learning a new language or dialect, knowing that the new discourses will expand their communicative repertoires rather than displace their familiar ways of communicating.

The Learner

Students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse needs and goals. With adolescent language learners, factors such as peer pressure, the presence of role models, and the level of home support can strongly affect the desire and ability to learn a second language.

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Diverse needs

A basic educational principle is that new learning should be based on prior experiences and existing skills. Although this principle is known and generally agreed upon by educators, in practice it is often overshadowed by the administrative convenience of the linear curriculum and the single textbook. Homogeneous curricula and materials are problematic enough if all learners are from a single language and cultural background, but they are indefensible given the great diversity in today's classrooms. Such diversity requires a different conception of curricula and a different approach to materials. Differentiation and individualization are not a luxury in this context: They are a necessity.

Diverse goals

Learners' goals may determine how they use the language being learned, how native-like their pronunciation will be, how lexically elaborate and grammatically accurate their utterances will be, and how much energy they will expend to understand messages in the target language. Learners' goals can vary from wholly integrative—the desire to assimilate and become a full member of the English-speaking world—to primarily instrumental—oriented toward specific goals such as academic or professional success (Gardner, 1989). Educators working with English language learners must also consider whether the communities in which their students live, work, and study accept them, support their efforts, and offer them genuine English-learning opportunities.

Peer groups

Teenagers tend to be heavily influenced by their peer groups. In second language learning, peer pressure often undermines the goals set by parents and teachers. Peer pressure often reduces the desire of the student to work toward native pronunciation, because the sounds of the target language may be regarded as strange. For learners of English as a second language, speaking like a native speaker may unconsciously be regarded as a sign of no longer belonging to their native-language peer group. In working with secondary school students, it is important to keep these peer influences in mind and to foster a positive image for proficiency in a second language.

Role models

Students need to have positive and realistic role models who demonstrate the value of being proficient in more than one language. It is also helpful for students to read literature about the personal experiences of people from diverse language and dialect backgrounds. Through discussions of the challenges experienced by others, students can develop a better understanding of their own challenges.

Home support

Support from home is very important for successful second language learning. Some educators believe that parents of English language learners should speak only English in the home (see, e.g., recommendations made in Rodríguez, 1982). However, far more important than speaking English is that parents value both the native language and English, communicate with their children in whichever language is most comfortable, and show support for and interest in their children's progress.

The Learning Process

When we think of second language development as a learning process, we need to remember that different students have different learning styles, that intrinsic motivation aids learning, and that the quality of classroom interaction matters a great deal.

Learning styles

Research has shown that individuals vary greatly in the ways they learn a second language (Skehan, 1989). Some learners are more analytically oriented and thrive on picking apart words and sentences. Others are more globally oriented, needing to experience overall patterns of language in meaningful contexts before making sense of the linguistic parts and forms. Some learners are more visually oriented, others more geared to sounds.

Motivation

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), intrinsic motivation is related to basic human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Intrinsically motivated activities are those that the learner engages in for their own sake because of their value, interest, and challenge. Such activities present the best possible opportunities for learning.

Classroom interaction

Language learning does not occur as a result of the transmission of facts about language or from a succession of rote memorization drills. It is the result of opportunities for meaningful interaction with others in the target language. Therefore, lecturing and recitation are not the most appropriate modes of language use in the second language classroom. Teachers need to move toward more richly interactive language use, such as that found in instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) and collaborative classroom work (Adger, Kalyanpur, Peterson, & Bridger, 1995).

Conclusion

While this digest has focused on the second language acquisition process from the perspective of the language, the learner, and the learning process, it is important to point out that the larger social and cultural contexts of second language development have a tremendous impact on second language learning, especially for immigrant students. The status of students' ethnic groups in relation to the larger culture can help or hinder the acquisition of the language of mainstream society.

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